**Chapter Title:** More Than an Electronic Soapbox: Activist Web Presence as a Collective Action Frame, Newspaper Source and Police Surveillance Tool During the London G20 Protests in 2009

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Author biography: Jonathan Cable completed his PhD in Journalism Studies at Cardiff University in July 2012. His thesis examined the impact of the media and protest tactics of three different protest groups, and the affect these tactics had on their ability to publicise their key messages. It used the concept of political opportunity structures to explore the external influences on protest groups which guide the relative success and failure of these protest groups to reach their aims and goals. Since then he continued to work at Cardiff University as a researcher on a variety of projects from a BBC Trust funded project at Cardiff University investigating BBC impartiality across various forms of programming. To an AHRC funded project focusing on public engagement activities in the Arts and Humanities. The project developed an online resource aimed at the academic community, which helps with the design, delivery and evaluation of public engagement activities.

1. **Introduction**

In April 2009 the Group of 20 (G20) international summit was held in London, and similar to previous summits was met by a mass demonstration. The protests against the summit fit into a sequence of anti-globalisation demonstrations over the last fifteen years or so. These summit protests first gained international prominence at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle, Washington in December 1999 ([DeLuca and Peeples 2002](#_ENREF_6)). The London protests were spearheaded by G20Meltdown, an umbrella organization representing around sixty groups ([G20Meltdown 2009o](#_ENREF_26))[[1]](#footnote-1). The aims of the group were to highlight issues of war, climate change, financial crimes and land borders, and these were all connected together by the overarching subject of capitalism. The use of the G20 summit as a protest platform was against a backdrop of press attention on the banking crisis and MPs’ expenses scandal ([Curtice and Park 2010, 131](#_ENREF_4)). The aim of this chapter is to look specifically at the media strategies used by G20Metldown to communicate their messages, mobilise support, and their representation by the press. In doing so the chapter will examine their use of the internet and explore the interrelationship between protester messages, press coverage, and police tactics. This is because the way that activists portray themselves and the messages and images they promote online resonate beyond activist circles. This will be shown to occur in both press reports and police intelligence gathering. The two important questions raised in this chapter are 1) how are online platforms used by activists? and 2) how are activists’ online messages used and interpreted by the press and police? Before addressing these questions the chapter will present a brief theoretical background to the research to situate it within broader academic debates.

1. **Political and Media Opportunities**

Protest groups utilise many different modes of communication and protest tactics, each of which provokes a variety of reactions from the press and dominant institutions[[2]](#footnote-2). The actions and reactions to protest provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that shape collective action. To theoretically contextualise the influences on collective action is to consider political opportunities. The definition of political opportunities ties the relative success and failure of protest groups to political, institutional, and environmental variables that shape collective action ([Eisinger 1973](#_ENREF_10); [Gamson and Meyer 1996](#_ENREF_28); [Meyer 1993](#_ENREF_38); [Meyer and Minkoff 2004](#_ENREF_39); [Sireau 2009](#_ENREF_55)). The role of the media in political opportunities has not previously been granted sufficient theoretical prominence. It needs to because today the media is the focal point and site of political debate. The theory of political opportunities has come under more scrutiny and been moved towards a more mediated model of political opportunities. This is where the media gains increased prominence in the success and failure of protest groups to publicise their messages (Cammaerts 2012, McCurdy 2012). The basis of this power relationship is effectively described by Wolfsfeld as:

The relative power of either side – a given news medium and a given antagonist – is determined by the value of its services divided by its need for those offered by the other. ([2003, 84](#_ENREF_58))

Power in this quote refers to “relative dependence” ([ibid, 84](#_ENREF_41)), or more simply who needs who more. This power equation is weighted towards the media, because they are not obliged to cover a protest group. It follows that the media’s power and involvement in contentious politics is their ability to signal to dominant institutions what issues should be granted increased salience. This means the media agenda is significant not only because of its influence on the political and public agenda, but its ability to increase the prominence of issues ([Behr and Iyengar 1985, 38](#_ENREF_3)). This is where media opportunities are important to the promotion of protester messaging, because if a group is able to highlight an issue in the press it will potentially move up the media agenda. Furthermore, if the issues under protest are already on the media agenda they are more likely to be reported favourably. However, protest groups are competing with other more institutionally powerful sources attempting to make their definition of an issue the dominant definition.

* 1. **Protest Group Messages and Self-Representation**

This approach puts an increased focus on the messaging and mode of communication used by protest groups and follows Diani’s political message approach towards political opportunities. He argues that successful protest group messaging occurs within many different media and political contexts ([1996, 1067](#_ENREF_7)). Investigating the messages of protest groups is to examine the collective action frames contained in protester communications. These represent a protest group’s interpretation of an issue that is unfiltered by the mainstream media. The function of collective action frames in this context is to diagnose and define an issue as an issue, highlight the issues, and suggest potential solutions to a grievance ([Gamson 2003](#_ENREF_27); [Sireau 2009](#_ENREF_55); [Snow and Benford 1992](#_ENREF_56); [Entman 1993](#_ENREF_11)). To bring these issues to public attention protest groups utilise a number of different protest and media tactics ([McAdam and Su 2002](#_ENREF_36); [Lipsky 1968](#_ENREF_35); [Eisinger 1973](#_ENREF_10)). Rucht argues that in a response to a lack of media coverage activists can use a combination of the Quadruple A referring to abstaining from the media, attacking the media, adapting to the media and the creation of mainstream media alternatives ([2004, 36-37](#_ENREF_53)).

In the case of G20Meltdown the communications tactics were a mixture of adaptation and the creation of alternatives, in particular online. To contextualise this use of digital media further Hands provides an exploration of the use of digital technology in activism and its relationship with power ([2011](#_ENREF_30)). Hands specifically talks about capitalism as the overarching power that online activism targets and aims to dissolve power relations (ibid, 8). Furthermore, Hands states that one of the key uses of online activism is in the mobilization and coordination of protest actions. This has meant that in the run up to, and on the day of protest participants can be moved around more effectively, and adjust protest tactics to perhaps instigate a more direct action approach (ibid, 124-125). This chapter will demonstrate how G20Meltdown used online communications to promote their messages, but it will also emphasise how these messages were interpreted by the press and police.

**2.2. Mass Demonstrations and Media Coverage**

The transition of protester messages into media coverage brings in Entman’s concept of framing where media texts construct and put forward an ‘imprint of power’ ([1993](#_ENREF_11)). In this respect the media plays the role of ‘validator’ of competing frames and influences “whose views need to be taken seriously” ([Gamson and Meyer 1996, 290](#_ENREF_28)). Furthermore, a group’s choice of protest tactics has a major impact on the content and amount of media coverage. The repertoire of tactics available to protest groups ranges from direct democratic events such as voting, to heavy violence, arson or violence against people have ([Kriesi et al. 1992, 228](#_ENREF_32)). The more spectacular and confrontational the protest tactics the greater the publicity a group will receive, but consequently the press will critically divorce the protest from the underlying issues removing the context as to why a group is protesting ([Rosie and Gorringe 2009a](#_ENREF_51); [Wykes 2000](#_ENREF_60); [Gitlin 1980](#_ENREF_29); [DeLuca 1999](#_ENREF_5); [Wahl-Jorgensen 2003](#_ENREF_57)). The use of confrontational tactics, such as stunts and image events by protest groups both recognises and manipulates news values.

Gamson and Mayer argue that the image and spectacle created by protest is its primary news value, and this is particularly true when protests turn more aggressive, even violent: “Burning buildings and burning tires make better television than peaceful vigils and orderly marches” ([1996, 288](#_ENREF_28)). This is what Wahl-Jorgensen found in her research of the Mayday demonstrations in London in 2001. The early newspaper articles in the run up to the protest set the tone with predictions of violence (2003). This resulted in the coverage falling into three different categories 1) law and order, where protesters are a problem of policing; 2) the economy, the negative impact of protest on the economy; and 3) the spectacle, a focus on the processes and consequences of protest (ibid: 131). There is always the potential that confrontational protests will be covered in the press by dominant themes of disruption and an anticipation of violence.

1. **Method**

To fully investigate G20Meltdown’s collective action frames, press coverage and the reaction of the police and dominant institutions a range of different empirical methods were used. First, G20Meltdown’s official website, Twitter feed, Facebook pages and electronic copies of leaflets found on their official website were examined. More specifically, these sources were examined to deduce the key issues at the heart of the protest, where blame for the issues was attributed, suggested solutions, the framing of the protest opportunity or more bluntly why now is the time to act, the expectations of success, and the mobilising of resources. These aspects of protest communications are at the core of collective action framing ([Sireau 2009, 136-7, 162](#_ENREF_55); [Gamson and Meyer 1996, 286](#_ENREF_28)). Second, to create a detailed picture of how G20Meltdown were presented in the press a content analysis of British national press was carried out. The debates around the issues and protest found in newspapers reveal the “strategies of power or strategies for defining the rational and the commonsensical” ([Wahl-Jorgensen 2003, 133-134](#_ENREF_57)). The sample was taken from British newspapers between January 2009 and June 2009 and included tabloids, middle market and broadsheets spread across political ideologies. The online newspaper database Nexis was used to collect the press reports. The focus was placed on articles that contained the name of the group, G20Meltdown, and the names of 5 high profile members involved in the campaign.

The emphasis on the name of the group rather than the G20 protests in general allowed for the inclusion of a wider range of publications, and a concentrated targeting on the group’s messages and protest tactics. This method yielded 97 newspaper reports in the timeframe. To examine the press samples visual framing of the protest the images accompanying articles were sourced from physical copies of the newspapers and analysed. This was to uncover any patterns in the imagery used, how these images complemented or contrasted to the written articles, and whether or not these images contributed to the overall framing of the protest. The interplay between text and image provides valuable insight into the dominant framing of protest events. Finally, following the G20 protests a number of governmental and police reports were produced which were examined to build a picture of dominant institutional reactions to the protest. This chapter will now move on to detail the results of the empirical methods, and the implications of the findings for protest groups and future academic research.

1. **The Media and Political Opportunities of the G20 Summit**

The actions of G20Meltdown are situated within the political and media context of the G20 summit in London. These types of international summits represent a large political and media opportunity for protest groups to get attention. This is because these international summits attract a lot of media focus which allows groups like G20Meltdown the opportunity to exploit this attention. The G20 summit occurred in the aftermath of Britain’s banking crisis and the global economic crisis in 2008, and followed a summer of political scandal in 2007 with the release of the MPs’ expenses ([Curtice and Park 2010, 131](#_ENREF_4)). The place of the banking crisis and the G20 summit for G20Meltdown’s political and protest opportunities is detailed in an interview with one of the more prominent members of the network Marina Pepper in *Shift Magazine*: “With the crunch and the bail outs enough people could finally see the bleeding obvious: don’t ask the problem for solutions. We are the solution” ([2009](#_ENREF_48)).

This quote places capitalism as the main issue at the heart of the protest, and G20Meltdown represents the alternative. The press’ focus on the banking crisis presented the opportunity for the group to highlight their issues and played a large part in G20Meltdown’s protest. The other variable affecting G20Meltdown’s media and political opportunities was the lack of competition for attention. The only potential distraction was a coalition of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), trade unions and other campaign groups who protested under the banner of Put People First. They staged their protest on the weekend before the summit started ([Put People First 2009](#_ENREF_50)), and did not directly compete with G20Meltdown’s protests a week later. This meant that for G20Meltdown the political, media, and protest opportunities were arguably open, and as the above quote demonstrates the activists recognised the political and media context of their protest actions.

**4.1. G20Meltdowns Use of the Internet**

This section will explore G20Meltdown’s collective action frames through the examination of their use of online communications. This will show that the different communication methods used by G20Meltdown attempted to create a coherent narrative. The majority of their online communications occurred through G20Meltdown’s official website, and on the social networks Twitter and Facebook. The internet represents an alternative media opportunity for protest groups to reach the public that is unfiltered by the mainstream media. These online platforms were a place where G20Meltdown could fully explain their issues and present their preferred framing of the potential solutions to the issues. G20Meltdown’s use of the internet falls into four main categories:

1. Mobilising and advertising events
2. Provide details of protest targets and tactics
3. Explain the impetus and issues behind the protest
4. Respond to press coverage and police tactics

Each of these will now be discussed individually. The mobilising and advertising of events sees the internet being used as an organisational tool and aids in the construction of a broader communicative narrative. The following tweet is an example of G20Meltdown encouraging participation and adverting pre-protest preparation: “Meltdown meets today. Check out website and Facebook for updates.” ([G20Meltdown 2009i](#_ENREF_20)). Alongside encouraging protest participants G20Meltdown’s communications attempted to produce a sense that anyone who takes part in the protest will be part of something larger, and contained the optimism that G20Meltdown will succeed. The prospect of success is central to protest group communications, because negativity would ultimately be self-defeating and discourage people from participating.

The second and third facets of G20Meltdown’s online communications are inextricably linked. This is because the protest tactics are inherently linked to the underlying issues of protest. The name of the group ‘Meltdown’ hints at a connection to the underlying issues, and represents economic, ecological and political ‘meltdowns’. The march itself was constructed around four feeder marches converging on the protest target of the Bank of England. Each of the feeder marches represented a different issue and was led by a large horse puppet to create Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. The horse and the issues they were said to represent were as follows:

1. Red Horse – War
2. Black Horse – Homelessness, also cited as land enclosures/borders to “celebrate the 360th anniversary of the Diggers”[[3]](#footnote-3)
3. Silver Horse – Financial crimes
4. Green Horse – Climate change ([G20Meltdown 2009e](#_ENREF_16))

Although these four issues are seemingly diverse and unrelated G20Meltdown would use capitalism to connect the issues to each other and broaden the overall narrative. These issues are presented as an entry point to criticising capitalism, as Pepper says “people will come to understand it’s all part of the same problem” ([Pepper 2009](#_ENREF_48)). This part of G20Meltdown’s collective action framing was a consistent part of everything they did. For example, the Facebook event for the G20Meltdown Party possessed the tagline that “Capitalism isn’t in crisis, capitalism IS crisis!” ([G20Meltdown 2009d](#_ENREF_15)). What is also clear from the group’s communications is that they did not see an alternative to capitalism being offered by the mainstream political system, and that G20Meldown represented the alternative. Their Facebook group states “We don't see any choice on offer except between bankers, bankers and more bankers, between capitalism, capitalism and more capitalism” ([G20Meltdown 2009h](#_ENREF_19)).

Alongside their online communications G20Meltdown produced several leaflets. When examining the leaflets themselves the term ‘protest’ is avoided and the idea of a carnival is promoted. British demonstrations have historically used the term carnival, for example, the protest against the G8 in Scotland in 2005 was called the Carnival for Full Enjoyment, and the Carnival Against Capital was held in London in 1999 ([Molyneaux 2005, 109, 111](#_ENREF_40)). The noticeable characteristics of the leaflets is their use of humour, irreverent language and imagery, and a mixture of militaristic and confrontation language ([G20Meltdown 2009k](#_ENREF_22), [2009l](#_ENREF_23), [2009c](#_ENREF_14)). The humour was contained in the name of the demonstration ‘Financial Fools Day’, and in the imagery of subverted bank notes and maps of feeder marches ([G20Meltdown 2009k](#_ENREF_22)). The two leaflets that resonated most with the press were a lot more confrontational and aggressive in their language. The first contained a slogan “storm the banks” ([G20Meltdown 2009l](#_ENREF_23)), and it is this sentiment that was seized upon by the press. In addition, the leaflet talks of a “Spring Offensive, and a “fight back”. The imagery accompanying the text adds to the aggressive talk with a mocked up image of a hanging banker (ibid). The final leaflet re-emphasises this sense of militaristic foreboding with an image of the Bank of England and a superimposed image of a horseman of the apocalypse ([G20Meltdown 2009c](#_ENREF_14)). The language again pushes the confrontational edge to the demonstration stating that “thousands of people will lay siege” to the Bank of England (ibid).

However, when these leaflets are compared to G20Meltdown’s official press release for the protest there is still talk of revolution, but this sentiment is tempered by an emphasis on peaceful protest:

… head to the Bank of England for a ‘Very English Revolution’.

The ‘Revolution’ will take the form of an openly organized free assembly in
public space outside the Bank of England, a peaceful and fun street party!
([Barrett 2009](#_ENREF_2))

The final use of social media by G20Meltdown was to react to events and press coverage before, during and after the G20 protests. Twitter was used to give immediate reactions to events, as well as publicise and plan further protests. The following list represents select tweets from the official G20Meltdown feed and covers the build-up, day of, and aftermath of the protests:

* March 19th – 12:54 AM – Conspirators are everywhere....who tells the truth? Which is genuine warning? What scare tactics? Who are these armchair generals? ([G20Meltdown 2009b](#_ENREF_13))
* March 26th – 12:36 PM – When asked about predictions of violence we say: "We would hope the police can keep their truncheons in their belts, but who knows? ([G20Meltdown 2009n](#_ENREF_25))
* April 1st – 3:23 PM – Teabags arrived. Kettle went on. […] Rozzers now in riot gear: Totally wrong outfits ([G20Meltdown 2009m](#_ENREF_24))
* April 1st – 3:51 PM - In all fairness. cops ARE behaving. Well why wouldn't they be? Did I miss something? G20 leaders take note: we've taken the power back ([G20Meltdown 2009g](#_ENREF_18))
* April 2nd – 1:59 PM – 100s have gathered outside the Old Exchange at the Bank of England. Come down and join us. Chants of shame on you to the police. ([G20Meltdown 2009a](#_ENREF_12))
* April 8th – 10:53 AM – Momentum gathers apace for silent demo: assemble Bethnal Green Police Station 11.30 Saturday. Events prior to Ian Tomlinson's death vex all ([G20Meltdown 2009j](#_ENREF_21))

What this timeline demonstrates is that social media allowed G20Meltdown a platform to respond to statements in the press, and react to police tactics. These instant comments on Twitter aid in communicating what is happening on the ground during a protest, and highlights the protester’s perception of the demonstration. However, as the last tweet in the timeline shows the death of Ian Tomlinson came to dominate G20Meltdown’s communications. The representation of the protest and issues in G20Meltdown’s communications points towards the group’s collective action frames. It demonstrates what issues concerned them, how they wanted to tackle these issues, and what the aims of their protests were. The words activists use to describe their protest actions become increasingly important when considering press coverage and interpretations of the protest. The activists clearly presented a narrative of a demonstration with a confrontational edge, but their intention was for peaceful protest. As evidenced by G20Meltown’s aforementioned press release which emphasises the protest as “a peaceful and fun street party” ([Barrett 2009](#_ENREF_2)) . It is this difference between activist and press representations of protest that highlights discrepancies in the framing of mass demonstrations and contentious politics.

**4.2. Press Coverage of G20Meltdown**

The interpretation of G20Meltdown’s communications by the press and police will be discussed in this section. The major themes found from the content analysis and their importance will be discussed. In addition, the effect of G20Meltdown’s communications and protest tactics on press coverage and the police will be unpacked. First, the press coverage was characterised by themes of law and order and the spectacle of protest. In other words press attention focused on the impact of the demonstration and the construction and nature of the protest. The dominant framing used in the press coverage was, in part, created by a Metropolitan Police briefing published in the Guardian in February 2009 ([Lewis 2009a, 1](#_ENREF_33)). The briefing evokes two particular scenarios 1) the protest was going to be as violent as the 1990 Poll Tax riots; and 2) activists would be coming out of retirement with the intention to cause maximum disruption (ibid, 1). The report also mentions the prospect of a “summer of rage” predicting that the G20 protests would be part of an ever increasing series of confrontational protests (ibid, 1). The frames put forward in the article provided a narrative template that would be frequently utilised in press reports. This represents the definitional power of the police. The Metropolitan Police as an authoritative source were taken at their word, and there was no rebuttal provided by any of the activist groups mentioned. The following statistics reflect these themes. The top-level categories could appear multiple times in an article, but the sub-categories only once. From the sample of 97 articles the major themes found in 10 articles or more are as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Top Level Story Categories** | **N** | **%** |
| Spectacle of Protest | 136 | 45.0 |
| Law and Order | 114 | 35.9 |
| Economy | 39 | 12.6 |
| Recognition of Protest | 11 | 3.6 |
| Total (Including categories not listed) | 309 | 100 |

### TABLE 1 A table showing the overall categories of newspaper stories

What the table shows is that the themes of the spectacle of protest and law and order appeared in the sample in much higher frequencies compared to the other categories. These two categories taken together represent 81% of all the story themes. This is further emphasised when the most frequent sub-categories that are dominated by the impact of protest, and acts of protest. The following table shows the sub-categories that appeared in 15 or more press reports (5% of the sample), and are as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sub-Categories** | **N** | **%** |
| Anticipation of Violence | 53 | 17.2 |
| Structure of Protest | 37 | 12.0 |
| Police Operation | 35 | 11.3 |
| Historical Protest Evoked | 22 | 7.1 |
| Cost of Policing | 20 | 6.5 |
| Disruptions for Commerce | 19 | 6.1 |
| Disruption to the Public | 17 | 5.5 |
| Protester Violence | 15 | 4.9 |
| Total (Including categories not listed) | 309 | 100 |

### Table 2 A table showing the top sub-categories in newspaper articles

What this table demonstrates quite clearly is how strongly the themes found in the Metropolitan Police briefing created a powerful template that resonated in the press. This is reflected in the three most frequently occurring themes in the coverage: 1) fear and an anticipation of violence; 2) references to historical protests that were disruptive and violent; and 3) a focus on the disruption and violence. It must be emphasised however that this was not due to a lack of protesters voices in the press reports. Quite the opposite, as the following statistics demonstrate when protesters[[4]](#footnote-4) sources are added together they appeared most frequently in the press coverage (129 or 41% of total sources). This compares favourably to the institutionally powerful news sources of politicians[[5]](#footnote-5) (51 or 16%), and the police (50 or 16%).

Although activists were used in the creation of the stories this does not mean that quantity equals quality of representation, and will lead to the protester frames becoming the most prominent. Instead, it is clear that the press coverage of the G20 protests was the creation and promotion of an anticipation of violence which appeared in 53 of the 97 articles (or 54%). This anticipation of violence helps to separate a group from the underlying messages and issues at the heart of protest, and distracts the press from debating the positives and negatives of a protest’s arguments. To give an example of how an anticipation of violence is constructed in the press the following *Mirror* headline “COUNTDOWN TO CHAOS” was printed in the build-up to the protests ([Anon 2009, 5](#_ENREF_1)). The images accompanying articles helped to reinforce this narrative with depictions of boarded up shop fronts, safety barriers, and the police performing security checks in sewers and rivers ([O'Neill 2009d, 16-17](#_ENREF_45); [Penrose 2009, 9](#_ENREF_47)). This preparation can partly be accounted for by the threat of terrorism to international summits, but these particular images were used in conjunction with articles specifically about protest.

How the protesters role as a news source in the press coverage manifests itself is through the simultaneous depiction of activists as an invisible threat and a visible menace. This type of portrayal creates both a hidden unseen threat of protesters planning mass chaos and substantial disruption, and an overtly aggressive amorphous mass of people intent on violence ([Rosie and Gorringe 2009a](#_ENREF_51)). By portraying protesters in this way ensures that the press includes protest in news coverage, but it excludes the issues. The role of online media in these press depictions highlights a major disadvantage of groups using an open media platform such as the internet or leaflets as a part of their messaging. This is because the statements written on these platforms can easily be taken and reinterpreted by journalists, and in doing so remove their original meaning. The use of these resources takes them out of their original context, and the quotes and images made the most prominent points towards the press’ preferred framing of a protest. This could fall into either a concentration on aggressive statements or an emphasis on more moderate voices.

To further illustrate this point the press used protester websites and leaflets as a source 25 times (8% of all sources) with the web acting as an electronic distribution network for information. The attribution of these sources would vary between identifying them as online sources, but perhaps not name the website. For example “One website urges demonstrators to ‘express their rage’ and promises ‘a day of f\*\*\*ing up the summit’” ([O'Neill 2009e, 5](#_ENREF_46)). On the other hand, other stories would not attribute statements to online sources even though they can be traced back to G20Meltdown’s website and leaflets. This was no more prevalent than the graphical maps and protest routes that accompanied the articles because these are clearly taken from online sources. This included information relating to protest event locations and the various routes of the feeder marches were incorporated into maps of potential ‘flashpoints’ ([Edwards and Gammell 2009, 5](#_ENREF_9); [O'Neill 2009b, 3](#_ENREF_43)). Furthermore, the press produced timelines of protest, a breakdown of protester demographics and number of people on the protest. These elements of coverage were recorded as the structure of protest in the content analysis, and related to the planning, construction and processes of protest appearing in 37 articles (or 38% of the total). This reprinting of activist plans helped to do some of G20Meltdown’s media promotion for them by advertising and informing the public about the protests.

The language of the articles replicated the phrases found in the leaflets and online. Especially the term ‘storm the banks’, *The* *Times* for instance says “violent sentiments” discovered on websites were encouraging activists to "’Storm the Banks’ and ‘Bash a Banker’" ([O'Neill 2009a, 8](#_ENREF_42)). The *Express* goes further interpreting the leaflets as prompting “Fears of bloodshed” and that the imagery used were “murderous” and “spread a message of hate” ([Scott 2009, 27](#_ENREF_54)). The protesters’ messages in these examples were used as evidence by the press for an increased fear of violent protest. The very use of online media and social networking by G20Meltdown was incorporated into the press’ narrative of fear. It meant that the protests were portrayed as highly organised with military levels of planning and precision. *The Times* refers to “Twitter tactics” and the use of social media to evade the police ([O'Neill 2009c, 5](#_ENREF_44)). The *Daily Mail* goes further calling the use of online resources as “GOOGLE ANARCHISTS TARGETING THE CITY”, and that social media was being used to provoke “mayhem” at the G20 protests ([Wright 2009](#_ENREF_59)). This heightened sense of potential violence and disruption was aided by how the G20 protests were contextualised. A historical context was frequently mentioned in news reports and appeared in 22 articles (23% of total). However, these historical references were characterised by protests that ended in violence and disruption such as the WTO in Seattle in 1999, the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, the 2000 London May Day protests, and the Poll Tax riots in 1990.

The *Daily Telegraph* for instance discusses the 1999 Seattle protests saying “It is a decade since the anti-capitalist movement exploded on to the streets of Seattle” ([Pitcher 2009, 24](#_ENREF_49)). It adds to this by mentioning the G8 protests in Genoa in 2001 as an “insurrection” that ended in a protesters death (ibid, 24). These historical protests were often accompanied by the names of the groups involved, and in doing so further enhances the idea of activists ‘coming out of retirement’ to protest. The following quote from the *Sunday Mirror* includes both historic protests and the groups involved to enhance its storyline where “ANARCHISTS from the 1990 Poll Tax riots are coming out of retirement to plot mayhem”, and “Notorious groups such as Class War, the Wombles and the Whitechapel Anarchist Group have secretly ganged up” ([Penrose 2009, 9](#_ENREF_47)).

The consequence of the press’ depiction of protest from within this historical context does give the G20 protests a thematic context. This is further advanced by mentioning historically prominent groups and aids in placing the protest into a sequential narrative, but as already mentioned this is from within the frame of disruptive and violent protest. The violence of previous protests in this case acted as a historical anchor for the press to attempt to contextualise the G20 protests. This dominant framing of an anticipation of violence and fear meant that all of the demonstrators involved in the protests were judged within this frame. The framing helped create a preconception of how the protests should be interpreted before they had happened, and this in-turn distracted from the underlying issues and reasons for protest. This is not to say that G20Meltdown were completely blameless in this portrayal, because their choice of words in online communications and leaflets became part of an on-going press narrative. Their communications had the second consequence of influencing police intelligence gathering and the public order tactics deployed.

**4.3 Police Interpretations of G20Meltdown’s Messages**

This section will examine the police intelligence of the demonstration to show that protesters’ online communications were used in a similar way to the press. These similarities relate to anticipations of violence and situating the G20 protests into a historical context of disruption and violence. The documents drawn upon for this section were produced following the death of bystander Ian Tomlinson and the implications of his death to police public order tactics ([Lewis 2009b, 1](#_ENREF_34)). The inquiries into public order tactics were held by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), and the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Home Affairs Committee. The official documents highlight the influence of protester communications on the police, and the briefing of this intelligence to and by the press. The HMIC document “Adapting to Protest” states that activist websites were an important source of information for police intelligence ([HMIC 2009, 42](#_ENREF_31)). This echoes the press reporting of the demonstration where the aspirations for the protest were interpreted from online materials. The police intelligence was therefore limited, and illustrates the potential influence protester communications can have on police tactics. The report states that police intelligence had revealed “unprecedented levels of communication between disparate protest groups” and “a large number of un-notified[[6]](#footnote-6) protests were expected” (ibid, 42). The police document goes on to explain that the intelligence for any ‘un-notified’ protests was garnered from “open source materials” such as activist websites and leaflets (ibid, 101). The use of online media by protest groups does, perhaps, hand the tactical initiative to the police and removes the element of surprise. The maps that are publicised online, for instance, allow the police to plan according to the convergence points and routes detailed in protester communications.

Subsequently, when mentioning the intentions of the protesters the police estimated that only “a small number of extremists” were planning violence (ibid:42). The report also talks of a “recurring theme” in the police intelligence which claims that protesters were aspiring to “bring the City to a halt” (bid, 42). The police did not know what the protest would be like or how many people would attend. The Metropolitan Police Commander Simon O’Brien admitted not knowing how big the protest would be, but did acknowledge that police were “monitoring chatrooms, emails, and open sources of information” ([Quoted in Metropolitan Police 2009](#_ENREF_37)). The implication of the use of protest websites by police and press means the content of protesters’ online communications takes on increased representational importance. The protesters own communications are being taken and interpreted beyond their control.

The final similarity between police and press perceptions of the G20 protests is the placing of the protest into a historical context. The HMIC report uses historical protest in a similar way to the press by containing a timeline of international summit protests and noting details of the number of arrests, whether or not there was disorder, and the structure of the protests (HMIC: Annex G). Again, this use of protester communications and historical context creates an overriding preconception of what will happen at a protest. The police preparations were geared towards an expectation of violence, and this perception is what they communicated to the press.

1. **Conclusion**

The fundamental point to be made is that “Radical ideas require more space than events” ([Doherty et al. 2003, 675](#_ENREF_8)), and that G20Meltdown attempted to open this space through the use of a mass demonstration. Although the use of the spectacle by a protest group plays into what Gamson argues is the press’ need for drama and entertainment ([2003, para 69](#_ENREF_27)). What the G20 protests turned into meant that scenes of violence and property damage came to dominate the press reports. The press pre-frame of anticipating violence, fear, and historical context are difficult for protest groups to overcome. A secondary issue is the timing of protest. The date of the summit, and consequently the demonstration were known well in advance. This creates a ‘news hole’ between the announcement of a summit and when the protest will occur. The hole is then filled by the press’ expectations of how a protest will unfold and this creates the frame from which a protest will be perceived and reported on. To illustrate this point there was a month between the printing of the police’s press statement in the *Guardian* and when the protest took place. The impact of the pre-coverage of protest is what Rosie and Gorringe state is “if anything more important than how an event itself is reported” ([2009b, 2.9](#_ENREF_52)). The anticipatory coverage of protest helps to create the media context which is “essential to a full understanding of any given protest” (ibid, 2.9). The influence of G20Meltdown’s communications is particularly evident in this respect because their aspirations, slogans and images were taken out of context and placed into an overriding frame of fear, and predictions of violence. The impact of the protesters own communications only added to the press’ sense of fear and impact on police tactics as their intentions were interpreted as being inherently violent.

The use of the internet by G20Meltdown is more than just a question of pessimism/optimism because there are mixed implications for protesters, the press, and police. The internet does allow activists a media opportunity on a potentially global reaching platform to connect with likeminded people, but this should be tempered by the fact that the internet’s openness means anyone can view publically available information. There are two main concerns that stem from this; the first centres on the power of activists to control their messages and representation. The public nature of G20Meltdown’s communications meant that both the press and the police seemingly took and re-interpreted these messages to either fit a news narrative or dictate police tactics. The second concern originates from the perspective of activist media strategies where information published online has become an easily accessible source of information for press and police. This use of activist online communications diminishes the effectiveness of protesters to become more integral to the news story because the information required has been taken from other sources. The case of G20Meltdown demonstrates the limitless potential the internet gives groups to publicise their concerns and actions, but these same groups must be aware that online communications exist as a readily available source for the press and police intelligence.

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1. The website for G20Meltdown no longer exists. A cached version can be found on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine ([G20Meltdown 2009f](#_ENREF_17)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dominant institutions in this chapter are taken to mean centralised political institutions and the police. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Diggers appeared in 1649 after the English revolution and demanded that land be given back to the people and held as “common treasury for all”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is a combined total that includes members of specified protest groups, unspecified protesters, NGOs and protester leaflets/websites. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This included Members of Parliament, the House of Lords, London Assembly members, councilors, and anonymous government sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The police divided groups into categories of ‘notified’ and ‘un-notified’ depending on whether or not they had informed the police of their demonstrations before they took place ([HMIC 2009, 99-101](#_ENREF_31)). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)